

**EQUIP1
CROSS-NATIONAL SYNTHESIS
OF EDUCATION QUALITY**

**Retrospective Pilot Study of
USAID-funded Education Projects in Malawi**

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Introduction to the Retrospective Study

The retrospective pilot study was designed to provide information on thirteen years of USAID-funded education projects in Malawi. As a precursor to a larger cross-national study of quality factors in education that will be undertaken by EQUIP1, this pilot study was designed to provide a preliminary understanding of: (i) the conceptualization of education quality that was explicit or implicit in project designs; (ii) interventions carried out to enhance education quality; and (iii) what impact interventions had. The results of this study were meant to inform the design of the larger study.

The four consecutive education projects in Malawi funded by USAID between 1991 and the present were studied.

- Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE I and GABLE II) (1991-1998)
- Improving Educational Quality/Malawi (IEQ/Malawi) (1998-2003)
- Quality Education Through Supporting Teachers (QUEST) (1998-2003)
- Malawi Education Sector Assistance (MESA) (2003-ongoing)

Research questions

The study was guided by the following general questions which probe the relationship between project interventions and resultant education quality at the primary level (all of the project focus on basic or primary education):

- How has education quality been conceptualized and measured within a series of projects or an integrated program?
- What educational interventions are identified as having had a positive effect on quality? What interventions have not had an impact on quality?
- Have the interventions had different impacts in different educational environments?
- What are the long-term effects of interventions on the system, teachers, schools, communities, and student outcomes? Are the programs or ideas from the programs being sustained or incorporated into government policies and programs?
- Do the documents available reveal local voices or points of view concerning the impact of programs?

Analytical framework

In order to seek answers to the questions above, the following nine-point analytical framework was used to organize information and describe the four projects:

- Vision of quality within the project design;
- Interventions intended to improve educational quality;
- Indicators of quality built into the project design;

- Intended outcomes (student and other outcomes) associated with quality and measurement of these outcomes;
- Locations and socio-economic contexts of program implementation;
- Degree of integration of program interventions with government programs;
- Impact and sustainability of program interventions over time;
- Program areas of success, as identified by evaluators and stakeholders, in achieving improved quality of education; and
- Challenges, as identified by evaluators and stakeholders, in achieving improved quality of education.

Methodology

This study was based on document analysis; limitations of funds and time prevented the collection of information in the field. The researchers studied project documents such as evaluation studies, program implementation reports, and donor information documents to obtain an understanding of the nine factors listed above. As various partners were involved in the implementation of the four USAID education projects in Malawi, researchers had considerable difficulty locating original proposals and program design documents. This is especially true for those programs that were implemented five or more years ago. In addition, no financial information could be obtained that would allow for a better understanding of the link between specific financial input and the intended quality of education outcome. This study, therefore, reflects information available from various earlier studies and project documents.

Structure of the paper

Contextual information is given in the next section of the paper, covering educational issues and policies in Malawi between 1990 and the present time, the period of time covered by the projects in this study. The four projects are then described in detail, using the eleven points above as an analytical framework. In the final section we summarize what the information available indicates about the relationship between project interventions and the education quality.

The Malawi Education Sector: Rapidly Changing Context

The USAID-funded projects described in this paper were implemented in a period of extraordinary growth in access to education in Malawi. The growth was so rapid, particularly after 1994 when primary education became free, that it greatly exacerbated already existing problems in the system such as insufficient numbers of schools and classrooms, large class sizes, under-prepared teachers, inadequate quality and quantity of learning materials, and a teacher-centered teaching/learning process often based on rote memory. The following outlines this period of rapid growth and reviews some of the reasons for and consequences of this growth.

A key event in Malawi's history occurred in 1994 when the country became a multi-party state. Within a very short period thereafter, the government adopted a strategy to provide free primary education (FPE), shift to a free market economy, adopt a bill of rights, implement a poverty alleviation program (PAP), and create a national parliament with three main parties. Within a few short years, the Government of Malawi (GOM) issued two important national policy documents – *Vision 2020* in 1998 and the *Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP)* in 2002. These documents portray education as a key factor in reducing poverty and encouraging development.

To ensure that the education system contributes to successful implementation of these national policies, two additional education documents were prepared – the *Education Sector: Policy Investment Framework (PIF)* in 2000 and the *Education for All Action Plan (EFA)* in 2002. Both documents address the key challenges facing Malawi's education system. The PIF is being used by donors as the blueprint for future education investment. The EFA addresses gaps identified in the PRSP and the PIF as well as the educational improvements that need to be made by 2015. The Malawi Ministry of Education is presently working with donors to prepare a national action plan for education to implement the policies in these four closely linked documents.

Although policies are in place and the shift to decentralization is underway, the education system is experiencing a serious crisis. Many of the problems experienced by the education sector have been identified by the above documents and in the World Bank's 2004 draft paper tentatively titled *Cost, Financing, and School Effectiveness of Education in Malawi*.

Contextual variables affecting quality: Economic issues and educational expenditures

Macroeconomic and demographic conditions play a major role in all countries in determining the development of education. In Malawi, per capita income was approximately US\$175 in 2001. Total expenditure on education has remained the same since the 1994-95 school years. This includes an increase in recurrent expenditure, balanced by a decline in development expenditure from 1.9 percent (1993 to 1996) of GDP to .6 percent (1998 to 2001). Malawi's overall expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP is significantly below other countries such as Uganda and Kenya. Almost 33 percent of total development expenditure in education has been provided by donors. Despite the FPE policy of 1994, households still pay a large portion of costs for their children's education. The District Household Survey of 2002 reports that many parents indicate they cover the cost of school supplies, uniforms, textbooks and contributions to school development funds. This represents as much as 80 percent of pupil public expenditures.

Access issues

Primary school enrollment in the country almost doubled from 1.8 million to 3.2 million between 1994 and 1997 after the government introduced free primary education. A baseline study carried out under the JICA-funded NIPDEP project in June 2003 revealed

that the ratio of students per classrooms at the primary level ranged from 121 to 241 in the six project districts. These data indicate a classroom shortfall between 50 percent and 200 percent at the primary level. In addition, safe water supply and available latrines are limited, which is a particularly serious problem in primary schools, with less than half the schools having safe water and the ratio of latrines available to boys and girls much too high.

Equity issues

Enrollment of boys and girls in primary education is now generally equitable, although before 1996 almost twice as many boys as girls attended and completed primary school. The present equitable nature of the system is attributed primarily to the creation of a gender-sensitive curriculum developed by the Gender Appropriate Curriculum Unit (GAC) and the activities of the Social Mobilization Campaign (SMC) both conducted under USAID's GABLE Project from 1991 to 1998 (see below).

Despite advances, the enrollment of girls decreases as they advance through the system. In 2001 48 percent of the relevant age group was in primary, 40 percent in secondary, 35 percent for primary teacher preparation, and 26 percent at university level. Although the survival rate for boys and girls in primary education is now relatively even, a discrepancy exists between rural and urban areas. There is a consistent urban/rural gap of between 20 percent and 30 percent from grades one through eight. This can be explained by better teacher student ratios in urban areas, a higher rate of poverty in rural areas, and disproportionately high repetition rates eventually resulting in drop outs particularly in rural areas. Urban youth at the secondary level are three times more likely to enroll than youth from rural areas.

Internal efficiency issues

Given high repetition rates in primary as well as significant dropout rates, 60 percent of public resources are used on dropouts or repeating students. It takes 20 school years to generate a single graduate from primary. The government is paying for an extra 12 years to graduate a student from grade 8. This represents a critical efficiency problem. There is similarly critical inefficiency in teacher deployment. There is, in fact, a wide variability in the number of teachers per schools with similar enrollments. The range of teachers assigned to primary schools with 1,000 students ranges from five to 40. In schools with 40 teachers, enrollments range from 500 to 3,800. In addition, there are strong differences between teacher pupil ratios and qualified teacher pupil ratios, especially between urban and rural areas.

Quality issues

The situation described above has led to critical challenges concerning educational quality that have arisen primarily as a result of a rapidly increasing number of students within an extremely resource-poor environment. Quality is a result of a complex mix of factors that includes inputs that relate to improving learning such as textbooks,

instructional materials, and teacher qualifications as well as the processes that are used to create learning such as teaching-learning approaches, school climate and leadership, inservice professional development for educators, and community involvement in planning and program implementation.

With the exception of textbooks for primary education, educational resources in Malawi are lacking and processes are difficult to upgrade. The CIDA primary school textbook program has provided one textbook per child for all subjects in primary education. Other resources for primary education such as desks, and pedagogical materials such as maps and chalk, are in short supply. It is estimated, for example, that there are 38 students for each desk at the primary level, suggesting that a great majority of children sit on the floor.

The baseline study conducted by the JICA/NIPDEP project in June of 2003 showed that the ratio of unqualified teachers to total teachers in six districts ranged from 23 percent to 38 percent at the primary level. It was reported in a 2002 final project report that, at the primary level, the pupil teacher ratio was 72 to one while the pupil to qualified teacher ratio was 143 to one. This indicates that not only are there too many unqualified teachers but they also shoulder heavier pupil loads. Students per permanent classrooms ranged from 106 to 241 at the primary level. It is estimated that only four percent of all primary schools have electricity. Lack of teacher housing in rural areas causes teachers to refuse assignment, while the HIV/AIDS pandemic contributes to teacher shortages due to increased illness and turnover rates. About 6,000 teachers are thought to have died from AIDS-related illnesses between 2000 and 2001 alone.

Key processes at the classroom level are crucial for learning. With high ratios of unqualified teachers, the education system relies on inservice to improve classroom-level planning, instruction, student evaluation and classroom management. This is seen as costly and few teachers have access to upgrading programs. Most donors have provided funding for institutional capacity building of the six colleges of teacher education and to create a cadre of trainers outside of these colleges to conduct inservice programs. Of particular interest is the focus of GTZ on improvement of primary preservice and inservice professional development. These efforts at improving preservice and inservice programs fall far short of what is needed to improve quality including the critical subject-matter knowledge, student-centered teaching skills, and overall professional identity and morale of teachers.

Time on task is a key contributor to education quality. In some areas such as Mangochi, students are absent for up to three months and as many as 50 percent or more may be absent on a given day. The main causes of the high student absence rates include unattractive and overcrowded classrooms, cultural practices and ceremonies, distance between home and school, caring for sick relatives, engagement in family work or income generation, and a school calendar that does not take into account the agricultural calendar that governs the lives of many rural families.

The perceived importance of primary education by parents is still high, however, as reported the 2002 household survey on education. Also, community involvement is

growing in school activities including donations such as bricks for building new schools and donations of time through volunteerism. Public awareness campaigns sponsored by various donors including USAID have impacted positively on community participation in districts where these projects have been based.

Academic performance is generally used as a measure of learning. In a study of fourth grade students' scores across nine Sub-Saharan African countries, Malawi fared below the average in literacy (35% compared to 53.4 % average), numeracy (43% compared to 47.2 average), and total average score (51.7% compared to 53.8%), with the life skill score above average.¹ For the baseline JICA study, Malawi Institute of Education (MIE) developed achievement tests for standards 4 and 6 and forms 1 and 3. Only one school in a sample of 24 primary schools demonstrated mathematics and English comprehension scores over 50% (standard 4 only).

As the above discussion argues, most quality concerns emerge from institutional factors such as large numbers of students, small numbers of classrooms, inadequate learning environments, and unqualified or under-prepared teachers. In many ways the system can be said to be a victim of its own success. Rapidly expanding enrollments have swamped the system's resources to support the improvement, or even the maintenance, of quality, although a rapid increase of donor support since the introduction of FPE has helped to curb the decline of quality.

It is within this context that the four USAID-funded projects (GABLE, IEQ, QUEST, MESA) described in the next section of the paper were implemented. The following section begins by looking at Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) which was initiated in Malawi by USAID in the early 1990s. The paper then follows subsequent USAID projects and, using the nine-point analytical framework, tries to locate threads that run through various program interventions which address the issue of quality.

USAID's Strategic Objectives in Education

The four projects discussed in this paper were funded by USAID and were implemented in the context of USAID's strategic objectives in education in Malawi. These strategic objectives identified access, quality, and efficiency as important themes.

By the completion of GABLE I (1991-1994), the Government of Malawi had improved its statistics on access and equity. Quality and efficiency, on the other hand, were still poor. Gable II (1994-1998) was intended to improve quality and efficiency especially through reduction in repetition and drop-out rates.

USAID's strategic objectives included:

¹ Chinapah, Vinayagum, *Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA) Project in Africa*, Paper prepared for the ADEA Biennial Meeting, 2003.

- Supporting the Ministry of Education in developing the Policy Investment Framework (PIF) as a sector-wide approach to improving access, quality and efficiency in the education system;
- Supporting efforts that promote gender equality and improve classroom retention rates;
- Improving the Ministry of Education's Planning Unit and its Education Management Information System (EMIS);
- Creation of a policy environment seeking to develop sustainable and effective schools and classroom practices.

Responding to the above objectives of improving the educational system by enhancing quality, efficiency, and innovative classroom practices, USAID implemented IEQ and the QUEST programs during the late 1990s.

As the educational issues related to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa have become more pressing during recent years, and with the prevalence of HIV/AIDS increasing rapidly in Malawi, a new strategic focus in the educational sector for USAID is addressing the HIV/AIDS problem through education. Consequently, the newly launched MESA program in Malawi will address and mitigate this critical social concern that directly has an impact on access, persistence, and quality of education.

USAID-funded Projects in Education in Malawi (1991-present)

Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE I and II) (1991-1998)

Objectives of the projects

USAID/Malawi Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) project promoted girls' participation in schooling within a broader systemic effort to address quality and efficiency in the Malawi primary education system. GABLE throughout its first and second phases consisted of project support for technical assistance and projectized activities and non-project general budgetary support for government policy reform aimed at creating greater equity, quality and efficiency in basic education.

GABLE I (1991-1994) resulted from an agreement between USAID and the Government of Malawi for a five-year \$20 million program. The program sought to increase girls' attainment (defined as access, persistence, and completion) in primary education. The program consisted of \$14 million in non-project assistance (NPA) in support of policy reform and \$6 million in project assistance (PA) for activities and technical assistance over the life of GABLE I. An ultimate goal of the program was reduction of fertility.

GABLE II (1994-1998), designed at the time of the introduction of free primary education, provided an additional \$25.5 million, \$21 million in NPA general budgetary support and \$4.5 million in PA for technical activities. GABLE II was designed to increase the long-term financial base for education through non-project assistance, and improve the quality, availability, effectiveness and relevance of primary education through project activities.

Vision of quality within the projects' designs

Under GABLE I girls' attainment (attendance, persistence, and completion) in primary education was the major goal. The vision of quality in GABLE I was more indirect than direct, with an emphasis on girls' attendance and completion. However, since girls' success and attainment in school is heavily dependent on quality of education, quality was part of the supportive environment that GABLE I sought to build through, for example, constructing classrooms in needy districts, increasing the number of textbooks available through privatized delivery, reducing teacher pupil ratios through the introduction of double shifts and multigrade classrooms in some areas, and encouraging increase in GOM spending for primary education. Although, by 1994 when free primary education was introduced, quality and efficiency within the system were declining, the 1994 GABLE II PAAD states that things would have been worse without GABLE I:

Gains in access within the education system have aggravated the quality problems in a system that was already impoverished before GABLE I began.....There is no doubt that quality and efficiency are poorer than they were four years ago when the analysis for GABLE I was undertaken. This would have deteriorated even further, however, had GABLE I not been launched. (GABLE II PAAD, p.9 and p. 11)

Given the decline of quality, identified in the GABLE II design as an increasingly pressing issue, the second phase of GABLE identified education quality improvement more explicitly as a goal. GABLE II's objectives of increasing the long-term financial base for education (NPA), and improving the quality, availability, efficiency and relevance of primary education for girls (PA) comprise a holistic, multi-pronged approach to quality improvement as adopted around the same time by projects in many other countries grappling with the effects of rapidly increasing enrollments as a result of Education for All policies and goals.

Interventions intended to improve education quality

During the three years of GABLE I the Government of Malawi (i) increased allocations of the total GOM budget to the education sector and to primary education; (ii) implemented measures designed to increase access and persistence of girls in primary education such as school fee waivers for non-repeating girls and launching a Social Mobilization Campaign to change attitudes and elicit support of parents of communities to education girls; (iii) established a Primary Pupil Registration System (that eventually

ceased functioning) to provide essential information concerning the flow and performance of students throughout the primary education standards; (iv) revised the primary school curriculum to make it more gender sensitive; (v) introduced a competitive private sector procurement system to supply and distribute learning materials to primary schools; and (vi) supported a small school construction program (AED 1998, p. 5).

Overall, GABLE II, in addition to the NPA support to increase the long-term financial base for education, focused on improving the quality availability, and efficiency of primary education in the following ways: (i) increase the number of schools through the establishment of community-based primary schools with a focus on improved attainment for girls; (ii) recruit and train more teachers; (iii) get more learning materials into the hands of pupils; (iv) encourage the enactment of policy changes to increase school efficiency such as enacting double-shifting in urban schools, reallocating teachers and learning materials to lower standards where repetition is highest, exploring possibilities for age streaming, and restricting late entry into primary school; and (v) improve the statistical and planning capacity of the Ministry of Education. Improvements in the relevance of primary education for girls included the following approaches: (i) strengthen the Gender-Appropriate Curriculum (GAC) unit; (ii) establish a girls' scholarship fund for eligible secondary school girls; and (iii) improve girls' scores on the Primary School Leaving Exams through gender streaming especially in mathematics classes. Under GABLE II a new program established a model Village-Based School (VBS) program to increase access and quality; the SMC, started under GABLE I, continued.

The Social Mobilization Campaign (SMC), initiated under GABLE I in 1993 has been a strong program continued through GABLE II. Elements of this program have been built into subsequent programs through GABLE SMC-EQ. The SMC has evolved as a multi-faceted campaign that focused on drawing more girls into primary school and keeping them there until they complete the primary cycle. The SMC initially concentrated on determining what messages and activities might persuade Malawians that a complete primary education benefits girls. In GABLE I the primary thrust of the program was disseminating positive messages about girls' participation in education, using the primary vehicle of the Theatre for Development program at Chancellor College and the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs and Community Services (MOWCACS) in outreach activities.

In GABLE II the SMC broadened to include community participation techniques in the research, generation, and dissemination of messages focused on girls' education. The social idea that was promoted was that primary education is useful to individual girls as well as to society. The target group reached in the campaign comprised of parents, peers, teachers, initiation counselors, school committee members, and local leaders. Theatre for Development continued but the program also included: (i) developing functional school committees that would facilitate two-way communication between the school and the community, (ii) mobilizing communities to participate in school development activities, and (iii) monitoring teacher and pupil behavior as well as classroom performance.

Whereas GABLE I and II SMC specifically targeted communities to change their negative attitudes on education for the girl child, GABLE-SMC-EQ, subsumed under subsequent projects, targeted the communities, the schools, and the government on how to improve quality and explicitly included infrastructure, classroom practices, community participation and ownership, government resource allocations including teachers, and teacher/pupil performance as parameters of quality.

Location and socio-economic contexts of program implementation

GABLE I was signed in September 1991. In 1994, while GABLE I was underway, newly elected president Bakili Muluzi announced in his inaugural speech that, as part of his commitment to democracy, primary education would henceforth be free. The announcement was in keeping with an agreement reached in 1990 at the World Education for All Conference held in Jomtien, Thailand, that all countries would strive to achieve universal primary education by the year 2000. From May 1994 through September 1994, primary enrollments swelled from 1.8 million to 3.2 million. Twenty-two thousand primary teachers, 18,000 without qualifications, were hired, nearly doubling the primary teaching force. Over the next few months most unqualified teachers received a crash two-week orientation to their new profession.

Faced with increased enrollments, the Ministry of Education undertook an aggressive campaign to attract donor funding to assist with teacher education and preparation, classroom construction, textbooks and learning materials, and other support services. As the former Minister of Education said when interviewed for the GABLE evaluation, “We went to the donors and said, ‘We want free primary education. We are on this train. We are going with or without you. Are you with us or not?’” The donor community responded with more than \$130 million for primary education. Exuberant over the advent of democracy, the populace enthusiastically endorsed free primary education as a symbol of equity for Malawi’s underserved population. The new Malawi government gained a great deal of political capital through the extension of free primary education.

When GABLE II was designed during the summer of 1994, the policy of free primary education announced by President Muluzi had just been established. USAID officials were stretched thin. They were simultaneously designing several major program amendments, of which GABLE II was one. The GABLE II design did not directly address the dramatic increase in primary school enrollments brought about by the policy of free primary education. Rather, USAID’s design emphasized several general policies such as reducing repetition rates in addition to the requirement of the government setting minimum and maximum ages of entry into primary school as conditions to be met for continued support from USAID.

GABLE I and II were considered nationwide programs. The 82% of GABLE funding that was made up of non-project assistance (NPA) represents a program with nationwide impact. The Social Mobilization Campaign, after the pilot in Machinga, a district chosen because of especially low enrollment of girls in primary education, became a nationwide program using the networks established under the Ministry of Women and Children’s

Affairs and Community Services for outreach activities. Some of the programs under GABLE I and II targeted disadvantaged communities such as the school building and rehabilitation component.

Degree of integration of program interventions with government programs

Gable I and II appear to have been integrated into the government's overall plan to expand primary education to the extent that girls' education was for the first time placed on the government's national agenda. Whereas GABLE I supported the government's plan to increase educational access, GABLE II tried to improve educational quality as the Ministry saw fit at that time.

There were, however, two major issues on which USAID was insisting, issues which the government was reluctant to address at that time: repetition policies and admission-age policies. USAID put conditions on the disbursement of funds that required the government to issue repetition and admission policy directives that restricted repetition in classes and put into place appropriate admission age policy. Although the former condition was implemented with rather weak support and success, the latter condition could not be implemented due to high demand for education.

One evaluation identified several linkages within the program that should be strengthened. The Gender-Appropriate Curriculum Unit, according to the evaluation, was integrated into the Malawi Institute of Education, but its role in the overall education system not well defined, thus threatening sustainability. The Village-Based Schools program, at the time of the evaluation, was not linked to the Ministry of Education or its district-level support systems which might have an affect on sustainability. Likewise, the Social Mobilization Campaign was not linked to the Ministry of Education, thus missing an opportunity for the Ministry to be closer to information and feedback looks within the program (CDIE 1999, p. 15)

Impact and sustainability of program interventions over time

GABLE I and II both focused on access, equity, and quality with the explicit emphasis of GABLE I on access and the emphasis of GABLE II on a combination of these factors. The GABLE program had a number of significant achievements including increased government investment in primary education as a result of NPA conditionalities in GABLE I and II.

Achievements during GABLE I and II include dramatically increased primary enrollments and persistence of girls. From the first year of GABLE implementation through 1996, two years into GABLE II, girls' enrollments at the primary level almost doubled and girls' enrollments as compared with boys' rose from 45 percent to 47 percent. Of particular importance, in a country where girls often leave school before completing the primary standards, is that girls' enrollment as a proportion of standard 8 enrollments, has increased since 1991 from 36 percent to 39 percent by 1996. This spectacular increase was assisted by fee waivers that were offered to non-repeating girls

from standard 2 onward. GABLE, of course, did not achieve these increases alone, but by working closely with the Government of Malawi to produce positive change.

An important component of the GABLE program was to focus on community groups for enhancing girls' access and persistence in education. Girls' education became much more visible on the national agenda, a result for which the Social Mobilization Campaign was largely responsible. Increased community participation for enhanced girls' enrollment was viewed as a quality indicator (the title of the program was Community Mobilization Campaign for Quality Education). An example of one program intervention that had a strong impact was a participatory theater model that was used as a research method. Researchers lived within the community and worked with community members to develop plays that reflected their concerns about girls' education. The GABLE program then developed a national social mobilization campaign to encourage girls to enter and remain in school.

The SMC, part of GABLE I and II, is identified as being highly successful and has been continued through the SMC-Educational Quality Pilot Project which started in 1998, the year GABLE came to an end, and has continued in two national phases since then, funded by USAID and implemented by Creative Centre for Community Mobilisation (CRECCOM) a Malawian NGO that evolved out of GABLE.

The combination of policy initiatives, project activities at the school and classroom level, and social mobilization seem to have been particularly successful and GABLE is often cited as one of USAID's most successful projects worldwide.

Policies encouraging increased girls' enrollments were very successful. However, the question immediately arises of what kind of educational experience girls, or indeed any students, had when they entered school at a time when the quality of education was rapidly decreasing. This remained a big question for both the Government of Malawi and donors during the coming years because the quality of education kept declining as more and more students entered an education system that did not have the resources to handle them all.

Program areas of success in achieving education quality as identified by evaluators and stakeholders

A January 1999 evaluation of the GABLE I and II Projects by CDIE, which functions under the auspices of USAID, points out that:

Where the Social Mobilization Campaign and Village-Based Schools Programs operated, program implementers took steps to improve schools. For example, communities became involved in schools, female teachers were recruited,

interactive learning methodologies were tried, and sanctions were imposed against male teachers who abused girls.

This shows that in limited areas where the Social Mobilization Program was implemented, there were some quality improvements. In addition, if increased public financing of education were identified as an indicator of enhanced educational quality by the designers of the project, then GABLE was successful in that the Government did increase its educational funding from 10% in 1990 to 23% in 1997-98.

Challenges in achieving quality education as identified by evaluators and stakeholders

The CDIE evaluation paper states that despite the euphoria and enthusiasm for improving education, it appeared that overall the quality of education for girls and boys declined during the GABLE period because of circumstances beyond the project's control. The introduction of free primary education flooded the Malawian school system with students, with serious consequences:

- Eighteen thousand out of the 22,000 new teachers brought on board were not qualified and were given only minimal inservice training.
- Class sizes remained unevenly distributed. Teachers in the early standards tended to have very large classes, some in the hundreds, while teachers in the upper standards often had very small classes.
- By 1999, there was a shortage of 38,000 primary classrooms; teachers were holding their classes under trees or in overcrowded buildings.
- Primary education advisers were not prepared to serve the tremendous influx of new and untrained teachers in a training, supervision, and support capacity.
- Systems were not functioning reliably to distribute and deliver primary textbooks and learning materials to schools on time.

Another indicator of good quality education, as perceived in the design of GABLE II, was reduced repetition of students. Under USAID's pressure the government issued a directive in 1995 to all schools stating that, from now on, repetition rates should be reduced and only a specific percentage of repeaters should be allowed per standard. By setting repetition goals for all standards, policy makers hoped to encourage schools and teachers to make better decisions as to which students should repeat. While the policy targeted a major problem in the Malawi education system, there was not strong government support for the policy and teachers were not prepared to implement this policy effectively. Teachers did not understand that repetition, large class sizes, and resulting lack of materials have a negative impact on their own teaching styles and habits. In fact, repetition had become such an engrained part of the system that a majority of the teachers believed that if a child does not repeat she/he is not ready to move on to the next level. They often referred to no-repeaters as "beginners".

In summary, GABLE I and II were implemented in an environment which was marked by the slogan "bring in the girls". USAID program implementers, as the whole system in which they were working, focused so intensively on increasing access that initially issues

of quality were not paramount. However, both the Government of Malawi and donors appeared to learn quickly that with skyrocketing enrollments and plummeting quality, an intensified focus on quality would be the most productive focus of policies and program implementation in the last part of the decade.

Improving Educational Quality/Malawi (IEQ/Malawi) (1998-2003)

Objectives of the project

Just as quality concerns were emerging in all donor and evaluation reports in Malawi, USAID launched the Improving Education Quality/Malawi (IEQ/Malawi) program in Malawi in 1998. IEQ I and II were USAID programs that were implemented in many countries from 1991-2002. The overall purposes of the IEQ projects were to: (i) inform decisions about policy and practice that reflect the reality of the school experience in the environment in which it occurs; (ii) strengthen the professional capacity of host country educators and researchers to obtain and use that knowledge; and (iii) introduce innovations to improve educational quality in learning systems through applied research on classroom-related activities, ultimately for the improvement of the quality of education in the country. IEQ efforts focused on research that reflected the cultural context and the national reform priorities of each country, measurement of teaching and learning, and partnerships with host-country institutions and researchers to conduct the activity. The program in Malawi was launched during the second phase of the project, IEQ II.

Malawi was a promising candidate for the IEQ II Project in 1998, in terms of both need and desire on the part of the government for more thorough knowledge and research on the best practices of previous and ongoing interventions that could be used for decision-making and defining intended outcomes. This was in the context of the development described above, the 1994 government decision to make all primary education free, the subsequent 1.3 million additional children entering school, and plummeting educational quality. Increased government budgetary allocations for education and continued donor assistance had eased the burden somewhat, but were insufficient to overcome deficiencies in professional development programs, infrastructure, supervision support, community involvement, and capacity to conduct qualitative and multi-method research to inform the long-term agenda for sustained educational quality.

The main objective of the program in Malawi was to build the institutional capacity of educators to identify approaches to overcome growing educational deficiencies in terms of quality. The focus was on building Malawian institutional capacity to design and manage research that illuminated the realities of educational quality at the student and classrooms levels. It was also designed to analyze the implications of findings in terms of operational changes needed within classrooms and to contribute to policy reform and dialogue among practitioners and stakeholders.

Subsequently a conceptual model was developed to examine the factors that influence learning by specifically examining the relationships among teacher factors, external influences, and pupil outcomes. The hypothesis of this model was that teacher quality, as well as that which takes place outside the classroom, influences pupil outcomes. Under IEQ/Malawi numerous studies were produced that aimed to inform donors and policy makers of the cultural context of classrooms and measures of teaching and learning.

Vision of quality within the project design

IEQ/Malawi reflected Malawi's vision of quality for its educational system, i.e., a system characterized by a decentralized approach with a focus on the school and classroom with frequent supervision and training support for teachers and communities to build and enhance skills at all levels, so that ultimately more students complete the cycle of schooling. The USAID-funded Quality Education through Supporting Teaching (QUEST) program, implemented soon after the start of IEQ/Malawi, incorporated features to strengthen acquisition of the vision, and the IEQ/Malawi was developed to link with and build upon knowledge gained from QUEST as well as from the USAID-funded Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) program which is described above. The resultant research studies, designed to strengthen the in-country capacity to conduct qualitative and multi-method research, were intrinsic to the vision in order to measure the outcomes of earlier and ongoing interventions, and assess whether or not they were contributing to the achievement of the desired vision of quality.

Degree of integration of program interventions with government programs

At the invitation of USAID in Malawi, the IEQ/Malawi project formed a partnership with the Malawi Institute of Education and Save the Children Federation USA/Malawi Field Office to examine the implementation of QUEST through four years of the primary school cycle. A long-term research agenda and professional development programs coalesced in this collaboration. Representatives from several university and teacher training institutions and the Centre for Research and Training (CERT) joined the research team.

Research implementation process

The IEQ/Malawi Project collected baseline data and conducted follow-up surveys in February and October of 1999 respectively. The complete research interval was 1999 – 2002. Sixty-nine schools participated: 64 in Mangochi and five in Balaka (serving as comparison schools), as representative of schools across the country. The schools were selected using a random sampling method after stratifying on school and class size. The subjects involved in the study included head-teachers, classroom teachers, pupils, school committees, and members of the community. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and testing. The key variables for comparison were pupil home language, number of qualified teachers and unqualified teachers in the school, and percent of pupils passing the primary school leaving examination. The data included:

- Curriculum-based measures of pupil performance in literacy (Chichewa and English) and numeracy for Standards 2 and 4;
- Observations of teachers' pedagogical skills;
- Teachers' knowledge and skills in English and mathematics;
- Availability and use of instructional materials; and
- Interviews with pupils, teachers, head-teachers, and community members.

Outcomes of the research

Descriptive analysis of baseline data resulted in findings that were shared throughout the system so developers, programs and policies which addressed system needs could be based on actual experience and outcomes. IEQ/Malawi also hosted a variety of events to discuss the findings as they inform educational quality issues and to encourage the use of research as a tool in discussions and decision-making related to educational reform.

Impact and sustainability of program interventions over time / Program areas of success as identified by evaluators and stakeholder to achieve quality education

The four-year term of IEQ/Malawi drew to a close in June of 2003. The Malawi Institute of Education (MIE) and Save the Children Federation (SCF) formed a partnership to implement the educational research program of the IEQ/Malawi Project. The partnership was unique in that both partners were local institutions. Their terms of reference included the conduct of research activities to influence government policy to improve the quality of education in the country. It included classroom-based research and interventions at the grassroots, community, and district levels, reinforced by MIE as a curriculum development center with the ability to use the research findings of the project to change national curriculum. IEQ/Malawi professional development opportunities, material, and technical support contributed to the success of the partnership. The strengthening of this partnership enhanced not only the more immediate outcomes of the project, but also contributed to the sustainability of activities and to the longer-term impact of effects.

The strength of the capacity building that characterized the project will determine the sustainability of the methodology, and ultimately of the improvement in the quality of education. Already notable decisions and products, validated by the research studies, are evident in the educational system. The project was earmarked by copious publications, seminars and workshops, and findings proffered opportunities for pursuing quality at the curriculum, professional development, and policy levels. During one of the later formal meetings of the IEQ/Malawi team, key accomplishments of the work were noted, and these accomplishments were descriptive of lasting contributions which would motivate future action: (i) creation of a comprehensive database, (ii) a continuous assessment manual positioned for integration into the primary school curriculum, (iii) a copyrighted resource guide for dissemination to donors and program developers, (iv) enhanced skills in research and development, and (v) an integration of findings from the research on an ongoing basis with teachers and policymakers who identify applications for the findings in their classrooms and with colleagues.

The IEQ/Malawi was characterized by three stages noted within a “cycle of improvement” – assessing the situation, analyzing the results, and acting on the findings. Baseline surveys produced data that, through analysis, revealed findings on teacher mobility, repetition, and drop-out. These findings, in turn, through dissemination and discussion motivated outcomes such as recommendations for school staffing, the design of new teacher training courses, and information for donors to use for determining educational aid to the Malawi educational system.

Quality Education through Supporting Teachers (QUEST) (1998-2003)

Objectives of the project and vision of quality within the project’s design

The QUEST Project directly addressed issues of quality. QUEST intended to improve quality of basic education by increasing access to basic education, enhancing quality, increasing efficiency, and by testing the impact of integrated curriculum. The aim of the QUEST project was to increase children’s access to quality basic education in a school setting that is conducive to effective learning. This goal or vision of quality indirectly acknowledges the realization that quality and quantity in education are two sides of the same coin, that is, quantity without quality is of limited benefit and cannot be sustained.

Interventions intended to improve educational quality

Under increased access to basic education, the project intended to create 16,500 new places and establish 33 new community schools (with 33 trained school committees) with 132 classrooms and 33 wells for safe water. To enhance quality, the project intended to support creative teaching. Creative teaching included: (i) using creative and diverse teaching methods in classrooms; (ii) developing teaching aids from local materials; (iii) making classrooms attractive for students; (iv) providing individual attention to students with particular attention to gender; (v) applying continuous assessment of students; (vi) using data in making promotion decisions; and (vii) collecting and using data such as absence rates and information on dropouts to identify problems related to class size and student persistence. To increase efficiency in the school system, QUEST aimed to empower the school committees to develop, manage, and implement school curricula and monitor pupil drop-out and repetition so as to achieve a reduction of 10% in drop-out rates. In addition, to influence education policy, the project intended to test integrated curriculum in one of the districts.

Indicators and intended outcomes of quality built into the project design

The indicators and intended outcomes as set in the project design were:

- Increased access for 16,500 pupils in 33 community schools;
- Enhanced pupil learning by 20%;
- Decreased pupil repetition by 10%; and
- Decreased pupil drop-out by 10%

Measurement of indicators and outcomes

In the first year of QUEST a partnership of Malawi Institute of Education (MIE) and the IEQ/Malawi program was established to design and conduct collaboratively a study on the impact of the QUEST program and of pupils' learning in particular. As part of this effort, extensive data were collected and analyzed to study the impact of QUEST. The data track students' performance in mathematics, Chichewa reading, and English reading using a set of performance-based curriculum referenced instruments. Information on schools and communities is also included in the longitudinal study. By the time of the 2002 evaluation, the QUEST program had collected baseline data in target districts in February 1999; follow-up data were collected in October 1999 and 2000.

Location and socio-economic contexts of program implementation

QUEST was implemented in three districts: Mangochi, Balaka and Blantyre Rural. After the 1994 presidential declaration of free primary education, schools were filled with enthusiastic students who dreamed of obtaining education and doing well in life. The school system, however, was not ready to accommodate so many new students or to provide quality basic education. Most teachers were untrained and most schools lacked instructional materials. Although USAID had been implementing education programs in Malawi from 1991-1998 through the GABLE projects, the issue of improving quality of education had not been sufficiently addressed. The QUEST program was launched by USAID in 1997/1998 to address the quality problems in the three districts at nearly the same time that IEQ/Malawi was launched to take a different but complementary approach to quality.

Degree of integration of program interventions with government programs

QUEST's objective to enhance quality and increase school spaces for children was directly in line with what the Government of Malawi wanted to do. The project was designed to build system-wide capacity for supporting sustained quality improvements through the establishment of school clusters, mentor teacher programs, and through facilitation of dialogues at the district, division, and central levels about systemic reforms and policy development that would promote and sustain quality reforms. A 2002 evaluation of the project showed that all government partners agreed with the strategies of the QUEST project and many were directly involved in its implementation.

Impact and sustainability of program interventions over time

QUEST project ended in 2003. It is too early to be able to assess the sustainability of the project in terms of continuation of activities after USAID's funding ceased to exist, although some of the strands of the QUEST project have been incorporated in the subsequent project, USAID-funded Malawi Education Sector Assistance (MESA) that started in 2003. From the last evaluation of QUEST, it seems that the Ministry of

Education fully favored the strategies of the program and wanted to expand it to other districts also.

With regard to the impact on student achievement, the 2002 evaluation of the QUEST program showed that some of the goals were achieved. Based on the monitoring data for 1999 and 2000 (other than standard 2 English passages, standards 2 and 3 English comprehension and standard 4 mathematics), the performance indicator of a 20% gain was successfully achieved. However, the evaluators pointed out that data results are based on asking students to read English passages from books that they had studied in the previous year. For example, students completing standard 3 read the same standard 2 passage that they had read during the collection of baseline data. In addition, students seemed to have memorized the passages rather than to have learned to read specific words. Girls performed less well than boys on these assessments. However, students from QUEST performed better in English; their mathematics scores compared to non-QUEST schools. The evaluators pointed out that “though successful, the accomplishments made by QUEST are not considered to be sustainable at this time and it would be premature to discontinue the support to current districts until sustainable reform is achieved.”

Program areas of success as identified by evaluators and stakeholders to achieve quality education

Following are some program areas of success according to the 2002 evaluation of QUEST that was conducted by the Mitchell Group Inc. The evaluation studied both the QUEST and non-QUEST teachers. Evaluators noted that teachers who were trained under QUEST were observed to practice more diverse teaching methods. QUEST teachers used grouping strategies, role playing, pair work, and integration of songs into classroom instruction. Most of the QUEST teachers also showed expertise and interest in developing teaching aids from local materials. The grouping strategy employed by QUEST teachers provided more opportunity for individual attention. Compared to non-QUEST classes, student-teacher interaction was much more prevalent in QUEST teachers' classrooms. In addition, QUEST teachers were more gender sensitive and did not favor boys over girls. During interviews 72% of the teachers agreed that training on materials' preparation was the most useful for them whereas only 20% teachers pointed out that QUEST pedagogical techniques for stimulating student participation and grouping techniques were the most useful to them.

The establishment of school cluster networks and the mentor teacher program were considered to be the most successful areas of the QUEST project. Teachers, community members, and education officials at all levels agreed that before the start of the cluster teacher development and mentoring program there had been a serious gap in Malawi's teacher support program. The mentors are called the Primary Education Advisors (PEAs). According to the 2002 evaluation, the supervision by PEAs varies from district to district. In areas where PEAs visits are sporadic it is due to the fact that the PEA lives outside the zone and is not able to visit the cluster on regular basis. To address this issue, all QUEST partners worked to construct houses for PEAs near the cluster so that they could visit the

teachers on regular basis. The evaluators of QUEST pointed out that this problem solving and collaboration among various partners is commendable.

As a result of QUEST activities, student dropout has declined in all QUEST schools and there is a dramatic increase in student retention in these schools. The reason for this is that teachers have learned ways to monitor student progress and make decisions about promotion through formal assessment at the end of the year. When teachers are aware and care about students' performance they are less likely to promote them to a class where they are more likely to fail and eventually drop out.

Community members reported that they were aware of the program and were happy to assist their teachers in any way that they could. The 2002 evaluation suggested that more regular community facilitation and support may be necessary from the PEAs to establish sustained community involvement.

Challenges in the program as identified by evaluators and stakeholders to achieve quality education

The 2002 evaluators pointed out that, in spite of the fact that QUEST teachers clearly demonstrated new skills in many areas that were included in QUEST, their application of QUEST pedagogical methods was weak in areas of literacy and numeracy. Much of the teaching observed in the classroom failed to maximize students' opportunities to learn. Participatory approaches to learning do not, in and of themselves, maximize a student's learning. Teachers are not able to encourage in students the characteristics of learning to generalize and apply simple concepts outside of their classrooms. In addition, it should not be assumed that teachers can develop adequate learning materials as a result of the training under QUEST. Some materials are required beyond what is produced locally especially for literacy enhancement. Also most schools had few, if any, desks or small tables and chairs at which students can work. Availability of such school materials is an essential part of the student learning processes. QUEST teachers also did not demonstrate sufficient knowledge of student assessment and various techniques of regularly assessing their children.

**Malawi Education Sector Assistance (MESA)
(2003-ongoing)**

USAID/Malawi has recently launched the Malawi Education Sector Assistance Program (MESA) through EQUIP1. The MESA project continues USAID's commitment to enhancing educational quality in the country. The project design builds upon the experiences of GABLE, IEQ/Malawi, and the QUEST projects.

Objectives of the project

The objective of MESA is to improve the effectiveness of schools leading to increased student achievement. It is expected that more effective schools will lead to higher student persistence, lower repetition rates, fewer dropouts, and increased student learning.

Vision of quality within the project design

MESA will contribute to the quality and efficiency of basic education in Malawi by:

- Improving teachers' professional skills;
- Making schools more effective; and
- Mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS in the education sector.

Interventions intended to improve educational quality

Some of the interventions that are part of MESA are: (i) improving teachers' professional skills, both in content knowledge (e.g., civics education, HIV/AIDS awareness, life skills education) and instructional practices (e.g., continuous assessment, classroom management); (ii) improving school effectiveness through the infusion of new resources including improving physical infrastructure of teacher education at Domasi College and Mzuzu University and facilitating the production and distribution of textbooks and other classroom resources; (iii) focusing on community participation in the classroom; and (iv) making school management committees and parent-teacher associations (PTAs) more effective.

It is through this process that MESA will address and mitigate critical social concerns, particularly HIV/AIDS, that have a negative effect on access, persistence, and quality of basic education. HIV/AIDS issues will also be addressed through Theater for Development (TFD) activities in areas where high-risk HIV/AIDS behaviors are most prevalent and areas where there were higher rates of sexually transmitted infections.

MESA will incorporate the new primary level (standards 1-8) social studies curriculum into all schools in Malawi and develop teachers' skills to use the curriculum effectively in the classroom. It will be carried out in three phases: (i) development of resource materials; (ii) development of national capacity in citizen education; and (iii) training of classroom teachers.

Indicators and intended outcomes of quality built into the project design

The key project outcomes will include:

- Teachers increasingly using: (i) creative/participatory methods of teaching; (ii) continuous assessment; (iii) effective teaching methods to promote equitable learning for both boys and girls; and (iv) teaching/learning resources effectively.
- Teachers mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS through integration of life skills curriculum and teaching methods.
- Teachers incorporating civic education into the curriculum effectively.

- School management committees achieving "effective" status and implementing as well as supporting strategies for HIV/AIDS mitigation at their schools, zones, and/or at the district level.
- Pupils increasingly: (i) retained in schools; (ii) promoted to higher classes; (iii) achieving mastery in reading skills in English and in numeracy; and (iv) passing standard 8 examinations.
- Constructing four classrooms and twelve lecturers' offices at Domasi College of Education.
- Establishing an Information Technology Center at Mzuzu University.

Location and socio-economic contexts of program implementation

In Malawi, the introduction of free primary education in conjunction with the impact of HIV/AIDS on the education sector has also resulted in a dire shortage of basic physical and human resources, especially of trained and capable teachers. These factors together have contributed to the overall rapid decline in the attainment of learning and the quality and efficiency of Malawi's primary education has deteriorated to a critically low point. Fewer than half the children who enter primary school make it to Standard 6, and a recent analysis of reading attainment reveals that almost 80% of children in Standard 6 cannot comprehend grade-level texts at even minimal levels. The overall budget for primary education has increased dramatically from 17% to 27% of the national budget between 1994 and 2002, but expenditure has dropped from approximately \$20 per child in 1994-95, to approximately \$12 per child in 1999.

MESA will be implemented in the four districts of Mzimba South, Kasungu, Machinga and Phalombe.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this retrospective pilot study is to provide information on thirteen years of USAID-funded projects in Malawi and to examine the relationships and dynamics between project design and project outcomes in a particular context regarding the improvement of education quality. The study was designed to provide a preliminary understanding of: (i) the conceptualization of education quality that was explicit or implicit in project designs; (ii) interventions carried out to enhance education quality; and (iii) what impact interventions had.

The study has limitations which arise from four factors: (i) The lack of field data and the absence of the voices of those who designed the programs, implemented them, and evaluated their impact, including the voices of policy makers and administrators, teachers, students, and community members in Malawi, limits our understanding of the impact of programs and prevents triangulation of information from documents. (ii) It was difficult to obtain full documentation on all of the projects which limited the researchers' view of project detail. (iii) The documents that were available to the researchers (e.g. evaluation reports, implementation plans, annual reports) vary widely in scope, depth, and quality.

(iv) For the most part, financial information was not available making it impossible to include information on allocation of resources in support of different kinds of quality interventions.

Despite these limitations, the researchers feel that the broad and general information that forms the basis of the study is sufficient to identify important overall trends and specific project purposes, implementation strategies, and results. We feel that we have been able to draw an informative picture of thirteen years of project implementation which will be of interest to policy makers, project designers, project implementers, and others in the education sector. The matrix in Annex 1 gives an overview of the scope and content of the four project that we studied.

The program descriptions in this paper indicate a shift in USAID's focus from quantity during the early years of GABLE to quality through IEQ/Malawi, QUEST and MESA. While in the early 1990s during GABLE implementation, USAID supported the government's policies to expand educational access and increase enrollments with scant attention to quality, USAID refocused its attention to quality in subsequent programs when there were indications that quickly increasing enrollments were having a negative impact on quality.

IEQ/Malawi is representative of one of the best applications of donor assistance to a developing country. By involving key stakeholders at all levels of the educational hierarchy, local ownership of quality improvement initiatives evolved under IEQ/Malawi. The program acknowledged the expertise that existed in the country, empowered locals through building their capacity, and stimulated a movement from emphasis on the philosophical and theoretical to the practical aspects of improving educational quality. Under IEQ/Malawi, action research, a methodology highly participatory in nature, was used to collect data to enable policy decisions to be made based on a concrete awareness of the deteriorating quality conditions that existed. Through IEQ/Malawi, USAID can justifiably take credit for enabling Malawians to become more adept at "mastering their own fate" as they sought to improve the quality of their educational system. In addition, during the implementation of the QUEST program, USAID encouraged the IEQ/Malawi project to form a partnership with Save the Children to examine the implementation of QUEST through four years of the primary school cycle. Thus, a long-term quality research agenda under IEQ/Malawi and QUEST professional development programs combined together for maximum impact.

However, the challenges in the education system of Malawi, as outlined in an earlier section of this paper, are so immense that even excellent programs such as IEQ/Malawi and QUEST have had only a minor impact on quality.

It is clear from the evaluation of QUEST that the intent of the project was good. However, unsupported by a classroom environment conducive to learning, diverse and creative methods of teaching have limited impact. Training of teachers to use interactive methodologies in the midst of severe infrastructural deficiencies severely limits the possibility of effective implementation.

The QUEST program provided state-of-the-art training to teachers, including continuous assessment techniques, but did not provide essential learning inputs such as open space, print materials, books, and pencils. Institutional factors therefore hampered the attempts of teachers to use the new approaches that they had learned.

Did USAID learn a lesson from the QUEST experience? There is evidence that the answer to this question is yes. Under MESA, USAID is still focusing on teacher development. However, this program also includes the production and distribution of textbooks and other classroom resources combined with a focus on community participation in the classroom and strengthening of school management committees (SMCs) and parent-teacher associations (PTAs). It does not, however, address the issue of school infrastructure which, according to many studies, is a major cause of low educational quality in the country.

The MESA project relates directly to the current USAID strategic objectives in Africa which are to:

- Expand access to basic schooling, especially for girls and rural children;
- Assure a fundamental standard of quality in the delivery of basic education;
- Increase national commitment to sustaining resource levels for basic education sufficient to meet access, equity and quality goals;
- Improve national capacity to efficiently manage those resources for the delivery of effective education;
- Promote public-private cooperation at all levels through participatory policy dialogue and increased community and NGO involvement; and
- Contain the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

In conclusion, this review of USAID programs in education in Malawi indicates that improving the quality of education evolved as a major concern for USAID in response to the specific crisis in Malawi's education system of decreasing quality that accompanied rapidly increasing quantity. Quality was conceptualized and integrated within a series of projects after GABLE. The Social Mobilization Campaign, action research, and teacher-focused programs (training and capacity building) were identified as important components of quality improvement during IEQ/Malawi and QUEST.

Teacher inservice programs provide an impetus for teachers to return to their classrooms and change the teaching/learning process for which they are responsible. However, in the absence of basic classroom amenities such as textbooks, materials, enough light and air, the level of teaching and learning remains poor.

Social mobilization campaigns and mentoring programs under QUEST were identified as interventions that had optimal impact on quality. Parental participation in school in terms of supporting the teacher and teaching mentors who provided regular guidance did seem to have a positive impact on the teaching habits of the teachers.

However, there is no indication that these interventions had a “strong” impact on quality of the education system in Malawi. The QUEST teachers are better off than the teachers who did not receive any training, but negative institutional factors overwhelmed the teachers who reportedly could not implement what they learned in professional development sessions. As in most USAID programs focused on rural areas and schools, it is difficult to extrapolate the findings to other settings, particularly to urban schools.

The study suggests that USAID might consider in future the advantage of the continuity of programs in certain areas. Balaka and Mangochi districts in Malawi were the only areas where there is some continuity of interventions in that IEQ/Malawi and QUEST were implemented in both of them. Although we have traced four programs over a span of thirteen years in Malawi, not any particular area of the country had the benefit of participating in all four over that period of time. Only with continuity can longer-term impact be assessed.

The MESA program, which is a new program and builds on the lessons learned from IEQ/Malawi and QUEST, will be implemented in Mzimba South, Kasungu, Machinga and Phalombe districts, all new areas. In this situation, USAID program implementers will have new challenges to adapt to, build on quality from scratch, and deal with new faces and demands. Dropping Balaka and Mangochi from MESA is strategically questionable. Lessons from these two districts under MESA would have informed policy makers about the advantages of continuous quality interventions in an area and the resulting impact on student achievement and teacher satisfaction over an extended period of time.

There were numerous evaluations of GABLE, IEQ/Malawi, and QUEST. These documents adequately reveal local voices and points of view concerning the impact of the programs. The evaluation of the QUEST program by the Mitchell Group, Inc., is perhaps one of the more comprehensive of the evaluations that the researchers of this paper came across. Whereas it praises the excellent interventions of QUEST, it remains firm in its criticism of the program, questioning the possibility of any long-term impact on educational quality due to classroom and other institutional and contextual factors. The QUEST evaluators interviewed teachers, community members, and government officers. Similarly, whereas GABLE was praised for contributing to the increase in enrollments, the evaluators pointed out the lack of adequate attention to quality interventions.

The ability of USAID to view the evaluations in a positive way and continue to adapt based on the lessons learned is commendable. The newly launched Malawi Education Sector Assistance (MESA) program integrates the lessons from QUEST and GABLE with a focus on teacher development, textbooks for schools, parental participation, and a new focus on HIV/AIDS. As this program is in its early stages, it remains to be seen how effective it will be. Indeed, implementing MESA in Balaka and Mangochi would have shown in more concrete terms the benefits of quality improvement interventions over a substantial period of time.

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Improving Educational Quality
IEQ in Malawi

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ANNEX 1

USAID Quality Interventions in Malawi – An Overview

Program	Geographic Areas	Implementing Agency	Interventions						
			Research	Girls' Education	Social Mobilization	Teacher Education	Curriculum Materials	Textbooks for children	School rehabilitation/ Construction
GABLE	Nationwide	Creative Associates, local agencies	X	X	X		X Gender unit to influence curriculum		X
IEQ	Mangochi and Balaka	AIR	X						
QUEST	Mangochi, Balaka and Blantyre	Save the Children	X		X	X	X		X
MESA	Mzimba South, Kasungu, Machinga and Phalombe	EQUIP1 AIR Save the Children, local agencies			X	X	X	X	X College of Teacher Education

Building quality in the system was therefore an integral part of the project since equity is always an aspect of quality. Other quality dimensions were also part of GABLE I, although the overall impact was diminished because of the introduction of free primary education which swamped the system with new students. If free primary education had not been implemented, GABLE I would have

(i) reduced classroom pupil ratios by constructing classrooms in needy districts, (ii) increased the number of textbooks available by privatizing delivery, (iii) reduced the teacher pupil ratio through double shifts and introduction of multigrade classes, and (iv) increased GOM spending for primary education through conditions built into the non-project assistance part of GABLE I.